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Hester Pulter's Well-Wrought Urns

Early Modern Women, Sonnets and the New Criticism

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ABSTRACT

Accounts of Hester Pulter's life often open with John Milton's poem to her sister, Margaret Ley (Milton 45). Yet the form in which he wrote—a sonnet—was not one Pulter chose to write in, and indeed relatively few seventeenth-century women did so. In her essay "Where had all the flowers gone?: The Missing Space of Female Sonneteers in Seventeenth-Century England", Diana Henderson suggests that we should read as sonnets many poems by women which have some sonnet qualities. Hester Pulter's short poems, including "The Circle [2]", "Immense fount of truth" and "The Hope" draw the reader into a dizzying landscape of circles, revolutions, centres, stairs and urns. These material forms represent Pulter's deep and rebarbative interaction with the sonnet tradition. Reading Pulter's poems in this way challenges versions of literary history that suggest women did not write sonnets for a century after Mary Wroth. This essay will suggest that seeing Pulter's poems as critical sonnets also allows us to place her work in dialogue with the New Critics. While Cleanth Brooks of course never read Hester Pulter, her metaphors of form provide a proleptic criticism of the New Critics' own use of formal metaphors to write literary history.

Introduction

Like much poetry by early modern women, Hester Pulter's work reaches towards seeming opposites: the extreme privacy of its reception history (there is none until the 1990s) and the extreme engagement of its references. As this special issue attests, her poems are immersed in and engage closely with a wide array of intellectual currents of her time: the visual culture of emblem books, natural philosophy, alchemy, theology and politics. Her works include a collection of emblem poems, a romance, and many occasional, devotional and personal lyrics. But she herself writes often of being isolated, even imprisoned, in rural Hertfordshire. And while retreat is of course often a posture, there is currently no evidence that her writing had any contact with the outside world; the manuscript at least does not yet demonstrate circulation beyond her household. In the short lyrics that are the focus of this article, devotional subject matter combines with elements of artfully plain, Herbertian, style as well as specific technical knowledge and metaphors, often from alchemy. This article will argue that reading Hester Pulter for form means attending to these aspects of spiritual narrative, technical knowledge, and spatial metaphor alongside more distinctively formal characteristics: line number, length and rhythm, rhyme schemes and pairings, rhetorical and syntactical structure. Several scholars have commented that the field of early modern women's writing has been shaped, for good and ill, by the particular modes of scholarship in favour in the last three decades during which we have seen the most intensive recovery of women writers: historicism, manuscript and book history.[i] Early modern women writers like Hester Pulter of course were therefore never exposed to (or privileged with, depending on your perspective) many of the most prominent formalist approaches of the earlier twentieth century. And even if these poems had been available to and read by the New Critics and their peers, we have seen already two major features which might have put them at odds with

Pulter's style: first, the urgent need for contextual historical glossing of political and technical, esoteric-seeming references, and secondly, the fact that these poems did not go anywhere, so to speak.[ii] That her poems did not, as far as we know, have any influence or impact for three centuries means that they resist incorporation into the direct poetic lineages which have often been important to formal readers, such as Cleanth Brooks's connection between the urn poems of Donne, Keats, and Gray.

This article will explore Hester Pulter's poems in relation to sonnets, a form whose history in relation to seventeenth-century women writers (other than Mary Wroth) has been defined as one of silence and absence, even by twenty-first century scholars.[iii] Many have seen this as an issue fundamentally more about Petrarchism than the form itself: the only way for women to take on Petrarchism, in the sense of both confront and appropriate it, was simply to reverse the genders of the lover and beloved, to adopt the position of the male speaker, and this could often be limiting.[iv] Diana Henderson argues that the problem is our definition of the sonnet and her work lies behind this article's argument that we should read Pulter's fourteen-line (and fifteen-line) couplet poems in dialogue with sonnets, if not actually as sonnets themselves. Moreover, these poems offer rich metaphors of forms: circles, stairs, urns. These return us to the question, however counterfactual or even whimsical, of how the New Critics might have read Hester Pulter. Instead of attempting the doomed, and probably undesirable, feat of belatedly constructing a New Critical reading of Pulter, this article aims to get closer to thinking about what form meant to Pulter and her peers, and what it can mean for her twenty-first century readers.

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PULTER'S CIRCLES

Hester Pulter's interest in form is as much philosophical, astronomical and chemical as it is stylistic. Many of her poems are about transformation, the changes effected by processes of death, alchemy or religious faith and doubt. Change is often represented as cyclical, as in the four poems all called "The Circle". Here is the second poem with this title:

"The Circle [2]"

Those that the hidden chemic art profess
And visit Nature in her morning dress,
To mercury and sulphur philtres give
That they, consumed with love, may live
In their posterity and in them shine
Though they their being unto them resign;
Glorying to shine in silver and in gold
Which fretting vermeil poison doth enfold,
Forgetting quite that they were once refined.
By time and fate to dust are all calcined
Lying obliviated in their urn
Till they to their great ancestors return.
So man, the universe's chiefest glory,
His primitive's dust (alas) doth end his story.

(Pulter 2019, ed. Scott-Baumann)

Mercury and sulphur were substances with various mythical, symbolic and medicinal connotations, and two of the prime elements in alchemical theory. Alchemists believed that the union of mercury and sulphur was crucial to creating the Philosopher's Stone, which had the power to bestow immortality as well as to create gold from base metals. These chemicals were often gendered as male and female, and Pulter imagines alchemists using love potions ("philtres") to bring them together, generating "posterity", which means both offspring and immortality.[v] But, this poem argues, all that is created is dust, just as all things return to dust and oblivion. The poem plays with the idea that Adam, the original ancestor of man, was made from earth, or dust; so, by creating only dust rather than immortality, alchemists return to "their great ancestors". The circle of eternal life sought by alchemists becomes a vicious cycle. Those who should have put their faith in God rather than alchemy turn to dust, both the dust of alchemical reaction and that of their ancestor Adam.

The poem is dominated by verbs of physical transformation: fretting (gnawing, corroding), refining, calcining (reducing to quicklime, a key method in alchemical purification), obliviating (forgetting, committing something to oblivion). Many of these verbs of transformation have meanings which are both organic and artificial: "to fret" was to adorn with interlaced decoration, precious metals or jewels, as well as to eat away at something. The image of being enfolded by "vermeil poison" is compact and expressive. Vermilion was used as a cosmetic and, poetically, it was also often used to describe women's lips, but here Pulter puts it back in the alembic, so to speak. Chemically, vermilion actually is the product of the union of these two key elements; it is mercuric sulphide, the poisonous chemical compound generated by this supposedly life-giving

union between mercury and sulphur (Archer 8). Here as elsewhere, the poem deploys the language and imagery of love poetry: in the "philtre" (love potion), and in the yearning for union and for eternity. There is, then, another "hidden art" at play in this poem: the sonnet.

The poem is in couplet rhyme, but it has fourteen lines, and a clear shift at the final couplet ("So …") which also turns back wittily on the poem, as the Shakespearean couplet so often does. More specifically, this poem alludes to the subgenre of the procreation sonnet, the first subset of Shakespeare's sonnets, and those which promote procreation while always also valuing the poem itself as superior progeny. Indeed reproductive themes run throughout Renaissance sonnets, though by no means straightforwardly, from the male labour pains of *Astrophil and Stella* 1 ("Thus great with child to speake, and helplesse in my throwes", Sidney 165) to the implied illegitimate offspring of *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus* and the double-edged urges to reproduce of *Shakespeare's Sonnets* 1-17. Matthew Zarnowiecki comments that "Shakespeare's sonnets relentlessly pursue the idea of human reproduction" and that they are also fascinated by "alternative forms of reproduction, such as grafting, coining, and imping, and to suspect versions of reproduction such as bastardy or counterfeiting" (131). Pulter, too, is compelled by these ideas. In her poem it is the alchemist, not the beloved, who wishes to "live/In their posterity", and this "posterity" is not the product of human reproduction but of the mystical union of mercury and sulphur. As in most Renaissance sonnets, here procreation is imagined but not realised. Shakespeare's Sonnet 18 famously boasts: "So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,/So long lives this, and this gives life to thee." (Shakespeare 2018, ll. 13-14). Sonnet 11, in contrast, uses printing as a metaphor for sexual reproduction: "She [Nature] carved thee for her seal and meant thereby/Thou shouldst print more, not let that copy die." (ll. 13-14) In these couplets—just two of the most well-known articulations of textual reproduction in Shakespeare's

sonnets—different means of reproduction, of creating future or even everlasting life, are placed in competition, and Pulter also does this. While Shakespeare pits sexual against poetic reproduction, Pulter pits alchemical against religious immortality. Pulter's turn towards God, then, is in some ways a rebuke not only to alchemists, but also to the masculine poet's assertion of his own textual immortality ("Not marble, nor the gilded monuments,/Of princes shall outlive this powerful rhyme", goes the boast in Shakespeare's sonnet 55). Pulter suggests that attempts to create immortality end in dust; attempts to preserve the vibrant vermilion of the beloved's lips produce only a toxin. But Pulter is also interested in "posterity", as her use of the word suggests, meaning both a biological descendant or alchemical product, and also fame and future recognition.

"The Circle [2]" is, then, a non-sonnet about non-posterity. Pulter engages with both sonnet form and alchemical knowledge through denial. In some ways it is a correction of, a retort to, the egotism of the sonnet tradition. Pulter uses devotional subject matter to show up the shared vanity of both alchemical processes and the sonnet's heritage as a monumentalizing form, the reproductive and immortalizing uses of both arts. Stephen Guy-Bray and others have highlighted the many alternatives to the reproductive trope of creativity in early modern poetry, with postures adopted by poets such as abjection and feminization jostling with the widespread image of paternal lineage. And abjection – specifically, religious abjection – is a crucial position in many of Pulter's devotional poems. But in "The Circle [2]", her response to the procreation so often underpinning the metaphorical world of sonnets is slightly different. She takes on the central reproductive image of the cycle and directs the reader to multiple kinds of cycle other than those of sexual and textual reproduction.

Reading “The Circle [2]” as a couplet sonnet, or as a response to sonnet form, draws our attention to the widespread connections made between sonnets and circles in the seventeenth century. When he defended rhyme in 1603, Samuel Daniel used the example of the intense rhyme scheme of sonnets:

> [. . .] nor is this certain limit observed in Sonnets, any tyrannical bounding of the conceit, but rather a reducing it in girum and a just form, neither too long for the shortest project, nor too short for the longest, being but only employed for a present passion. For the body of our imagination, being as unformed chaos without fashion, without day, if by the divine power of the spirit it be wrought into an Orb of order and form, is it not more pleasing to nature, that desires a certainty, and comports not with that which is infinite, to have these closes [. . .] (138)

The circle here is the symbol of formal decorum, naturalness and divinity which the sonnet achieves through rhyme: “in girum and in a just form”. The rhymes of a sonnet, like other forms, bring imagination into “an Orb of order and form”. Moreover, the term “girum”, from Latin “gyrus” meaning circle and especially the horse-training circuit, is associated with gentlemanly mastery.[vi] For Daniel and many of his peers the sonnet is circular, a perfect orb, like the earth and similarly created from chaos, but one specifically created by human artistry.

Moreover, sonnets are often grouped together in circular ways, most virtuosically in the corona form used by John Donne, Robert Sidney and Mary Wroth, amongst many others. In her “A Crown of Sonnets Dedicated to Love” from *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus* (1621), Wroth makes circularity both the form and the subject of her sonnets. As with all coronas, the first line of each

sonnet is the last line of the previous sonnet, bringing it full circle. The central metaphor of Wroth's sequence is also circular, both literally and figuratively: the maze or labyrinth.[vii] She famously opens and closes her corona with the question, "In this strange labyrinth how shall I turn?". There may be an echo of Pamphilia's dizzying experience of loss in another of Pulter's circle poems: "In this sad circle I run round, / Till giddily I tumble down …" ("The Circle [1]", Pulter 2019, ed. Scott-Baumann). This is in fact the only use of the word "circle", except in the titles, in all four of Pulter's poems called "The Circle". By using "The Circle" as their title, these poems demand to be read with circles in mind, but by avoiding the word itself (apart from in this one instance), they leave the reader to determine what 'the circle' of the poem's title really is.

So Pulter engages both with the reproductive sonnet tradition, in her counter examples of barren alchemy, and also with the critical and poetic tradition of thinking about sonnets as circles. Circles, as well as being symbolically rich, seem to pose an aesthetic temptation to the basically linear art form of poetry, and especially the little square box of the sonnet. In an article on the seeming absence of women sonnet writers, Diana Henderson conjectured that part of the reason for early modern women's absence from the canon of sonnet writers is an overly prescriptive, and indeed anachronistic, definition of the sonnet form itself. She asks, "[h]as the combination of the print revolution and the Romantic revival of Wordsworth and friends, then, led us to overemphasize the distinctiveness of their sonnet form belatedly, once it had become a classic, and as a result to miss the protean play and experimentation persisting in an era when such verse was, if not exactly new, not yet an unambiguously venerated pillar of the poetic establishment?" (149). Mary Wroth is central to this perception of women's sonnet writing ending in the early seventeenth century. Wroth's reputation as exceptional has been doubled-edged for women's literary history: her sonnet sequence *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus*, while widely studied and

analysed, has often been seen as the end of the tradition for women. In Henderson's summary, Wroth's achievement has been portrayed as "the last gasp of the Sidney circle's aristocratic assertion of an Elizabethan fad" (Henderson 140).[viii]

Henderson argues that a more flexible definition of the sonnet reveals a vibrant tradition of women sonnet writers after Wroth. She proposes Pulter's "The Circle [2]" among many poems which, while not consisting of any recognised sonnet rhyme schemes, might profitably be read in the sonnet tradition. Alongside her argument for the historical accuracy of a more flexible definition of the form, Henderson also acknowledges a feminist agenda, that of wanting to find women who wrote sonnets because they were, and are, a highly valued form: she comments that "textual choices" made by the editors of one pioneering anthology, *Kissing the Rod*, "signal the ongoing power of being 'sonnet-like' as a means of encouraging scholars (especially non-feminist ones examining women's writing?) to take a short verse seriously, and thus to make a space for female lyric authorship" (Henderson 151). I share this sense that redefining the sonnet is not (only) an unideological work of historical recovery. It is motivated by a desire for historical accuracy: sonnets were indeed more flexibly defined in the sixteenth and even seventeenth centuries. It is also motivated by feminism: reading a fourteen-line poem by a woman as a sonnet immediately allows it to be read as part of a recognisable tradition, and a highly valued one at that. I am both engaged in and cautious about this move to re-categorisation, and this article's point about Pulter is a slightly different one from Henderson's. Rather than necessarily categorising these poems as sonnets, reading them as allusions to the sonnet form—and in Pulter's case as quite rebarbative criticism of aspects of that tradition—might illuminate for us certain particular elements of the sonnet itself.

Various accounts of the sonnet tradition have focused on its masculinism, from the dismembering blazon to the self-absorption of the male Petrarchan writing subject, to the sexist scandals around the 'casket sonnets' attributed to Mary Queen of Scots and around Mary Wroth's *Urania* after which (it is often commented) no woman wrote a sonnet sequence for over half a century.[ix] And certain poems show Pulter engaging with, and rejecting, the masculinism of Petrarchan discourse. This happens especially in two of her moving poems on the death of daughter in young adulthood, ``Upon the Death of My Dear and Lovely Daughter, J.P." and "Tell Me No More [On the Same]". Though these are neither sonnets nor sonnet length, they explicitly take up the challenge of writing about a beautiful young woman without adopting Petrarchan clichés:

> Tell me no more her cheeks excelled the rose …
> … Tell me no more of her white even nose,
> Nor that her ruby lips, when they disclose
> Did so revive this drooping heart of mine,
> Like golden apples on a silver shrine.
> Tell me no more her breasts were heaps of snow
> White as the swans where crystal Thames doth flow ….
> ("Tell Me No More [On the Same]", ll. 9, 13-17)

Pulter rejects successive tropes of physical female beauty: snowy shoulders, sparkling eyes, rosy lips, Swan-white breasts. "Ask me no more" was a refrain used famously by Thomas Carew, as well as other male cavalier poets in the period.[x] Pulter, therefore, engages in dialogue with her male poetic peers even as she rejects the conventions of Cavalier Petrarchism. By countering

"Ask me no more" with "Tell me no more" she creates a sense of herself as well as her daughter as the female object of male erotic discourse. She no longer wants to be told how to perceive and write of female beauty by longstanding traditions. The poem itself tries to replace those seductive conventions with a more appropriate address to a deeply loved female object, in this case after her death. Moreover, the refrain of this poem represents grief as something that it cyclical, not linear, as Elizabeth Zeman Kolkovich argues. In the previous poem in the manuscript, also on Jane's death, Pulter actually uses the word "sonnets". Again she connects the form to mourning rather than seduction:

> Yet still my heart is overwhelmed with grief,
> And tears (alas) gives sorrow no relief.
> Twice hath sad Philomele left off to sing
> Her mortifying sonnets to the spring.
> Twice at the sylvan choristers' desire
> She hath lent her music to complete their choir …
> ("Upon the Death of My Dear and Lovely Daughter, J.P.", ll. 13-18)

The "sonnets" here might be any short lyric, but they are associated with Petrarch; this association is accomplished, however, through the figure of Philomel, not Laura, via "Canzoniere 311" in which Petrarch evokes the nightingale as a figure of grief, himself in turn evoking Ovid's Metamorphoses (see also Zeman Kolkovich in this issue). These are poems about physical and spiritual longing, but this is longing in the face of death rather than unfulfilled sexual desire. Of "Tell Me No More [On the Same]", Dolan comments that "the poem lists Jane's attributes and tries to stop doing so[;] it is both a blazon and an anti-blazon" (Dolan

"Headnote"). This is also how Pulter treats the sonnet form in "The Circle [1]" and, as we will see, several more fourteen- and fifteen-line poems: these are both sonnets and anti-sonnets, poems that define themselves against the sonnet. Henderson valuably reconceives the sonnet tradition to include couplet sonnets and other forms of short lyric, allowing the sonnet canon to include far more poems by women (and by a greater diversity of men). But in Pulter's case, poems like "The Circle [2]" seem to define themselves against, and criticize (in both senses of the word: evaluate and censure) the sonnet, by evoking its features rather than employing them. So in "The Circle [2]", Pulter uses devotional subject matter to show up the shared vanity of both alchemical processes and the sonnet's heritage as a monumentalizing form – the reproductive and immortalizing uses of both spheres. Pulter's poems also, relatedly, highlight the sonnet's circular and cyclical elements. She engages with the reproductive sonnet tradition, as we have seen, in her counter examples of barren alchemy, and also works within a tradition of thinking about sonnets as circles.

* * *

PULTER'S STAIRS

Throughout her poetry, Pulter returns to circular images: orbits, revolutions, orbs. A further fourteen-line poem has at its centre an intriguing image of architectural circularity. The speaker of this poem asks God for illumination:

> Immense Fount of truth, life, love, joy, glory,
> Irradiate my soul in her dark story;

Let not the erroneous shades of death and night
Obscure Thy love and glory from my sight.
Though this my corpse (until my dissolution
And then but by the stairs of revolution)
Cannot attain Thy radiant throne above,
Yet be Thou pleased to infuse Thy love
And light unto my sad deserted soul,
That in Thy endless mercy I may roll,
And when death closeth up my mortal eye
I then may live and only sin may die.
And then Thy blessèd name I'll magnify
Beyond the reach of all eternity. (Pulter 2019, ed. Scott-Baumann)

The poem imagines death as a blissful dissolving after which the soul will be reunited with the body in eternal life with God. The final couplet – turning the poem back on itself with "And then …" – promises to "magnify" the addressee's name "Beyond the reach of all eternity". At the end of his "Sonnet 55", Shakespeare's lover-poet had imagined his poem as a "living record" which would endure until the Day of Judgment:

'Gainst death and all-oblivious enmity
Shall you pace forth; your praise shall still find room,
Even in the eyes of all posterity
That wear this world out to the ending doom.
So, till the Judgment that yourself arise,

> You live in this, and dwell in lovers' eyes. (Shakespeare 2018, ll. 9-14)

While Shakespeare's speaker promises to monumentalize his beloved's name, however self-interestedly, Pulter's speaker uses the same language to promise eternity to God. Audaciously, too, she will do so after the Day of Judgment, as a resurrected being. The female poet interpolates herself into the role of the male sonneteer, but empowered by devotional purpose. It is a vision of radical dissolution, but also one of recomposition: she will speak into eternity not metaphorically but as a powerful resurrected being. The rhyme pair "dissolution" and "revolution" is a signature one for Pulter, as subsequent discussion will explore.

In the intriguing image of "the stairs of revolution", Pulter imagines progress towards the Day of Judgment, when souls and bodies are reunited and can join God, as a kind of spiral staircase. "Revolution" suggests an ongoing, or cyclical, transformation. The spiral staircase was already charged with meanings related both to poetic form and faith. George Herbert used it to represent excessive ornamentation in "Jordan [1]": "Who sayes that fictions onely and false hair / Become a verse? Is there in truth no beautie? /Is all good structure in a winding stair?" (ll. 1-3). Francis Bacon used the image to reflect on the precariousness brought by ambition in his essay "Of Great Place": "All Rising to Great Place, is by a winding Staire" (36). As with many of his essays, Bacon revised and added to this essay and he may have added this phrase after encountering it in John Donne's 1621 sermon:

> An office is but an ante-past, it gets them an appetite to another office; and a title of honour, but an ante-past, a new stomach to a new title. The danger is, that we cannot go upward directly; if we have a stair, to go any height, it must be a winding stair: it is a

> compassing, a circumventing, to rise: a ladder is a straight engine of itself, yet if we will rise by that, it must be set aslope; though our means be direct in their own nature, yet we put them upon crooked ways; it is but a poor rising, that any man can make in a direct line, and yet it is ad sufficientiam, high enough, for it is to heaven. (Donne 255)

Bacon's is an earthly, even courtly, "winding stair" to preferment and power and Herbert's is a symptom of the mortal weakness for artifice. Donne's complex usage is more ambiguous and leaves open the possibility that man's "crooked ways" are a necessary and sufficient, if slow, movement towards God. For Donne, human faith is not a "straight engine" and nor are Pulter's poems. Her image of "stairs of revolution" is altogether more positive. Like Donne, she imagines the winding stair as the path (albeit indirect) that mankind can take to resurrection and union with God. There are precedents for image of the winding staircase, either as a crooked (because mortal) route to God, a dangerous path to advancement or a Herbertian metaphor for the human inclination to beauty over truth. But Pulter's particular term "stairs of revolution" is so unusual that it may have been coined by Pulter herself. Instead of "winding", an adjective often associated with the serpent, deviation, deviance and artistic deviousness, she uses "revolution", a key word in her poetics, for the spiral staircase. This image of both progress and circularity speaks to the many material and philosophical circles of her poems with that title, and the engagement of various of her fourteen-line lyrics with the sonnet tradition and its own connection to circles, cycles, orbs and labyrinths.

Late in her writing career, Pulter's poem "The Hope" (dated 1665 in the manuscript) is an intricate formal meditation on the sonnet, its devotional possibilities, and its limitations:

Dear Death, dissolve these mortal charms
And then I'll throw myself into Thy arms.
Then Thou mayest use my carcass as Thou lust
Until my bones (and little luz) be dust.
Nay, when that handful is blown all about
Yet still the vital salt will be found out;
And when the vapour is breathed out in thunder
Unto poor mortals' loss, or pain, or wonder,
And all that is in Thee to atoms turned
And even those atoms in this orb is burned,
Yet still that God that can annihilate
This all, and it of nothing recreate,
Even He that hath supported me til now,
To whom my soul doth pray and humbly bow,
Will raise me unto life. I know not how (Pulter 2019, ed. Scott-Baumann)

Tonally, this poem evokes Donne's "Holy Sonnets". There is a startling shift from its title—which probably refers to "the sure and certain hope of the resurrection" in the *Book of Common Prayer*—to its first addressee, not God but Death. With Donnean paradox and panache, the speaker promises Death,"And then I'll throw myself into Thy arms, / Then Thou mayest use my carcass as Thou lust …" The verb "lust" did not have to be sexual in the period, but that meaning is brought to the fore by the image of throwing oneself into another's arms. This seems a striking moment when a woman poet inhabits the subject position that Donne had used so effectively in his Holy Sonnets: the believer who invites sexual use or even abuse from

their God. But here it is Death who can use the believer's body, her carcass, once her soul is bound to God in a different union. Pulter's distinctive approach is to infuse this daring address to death with another register of imagery, that of alchemy: the speaker is broken down and built up through Donnean ravishment, but also and more prominently through chemical transformation. Almost every image in this poem has both an alchemical and a biblical meaning: salt (Matthew's "ye are the salt of the earth" as well as the "vital salt" of alchemy, Authorized King James Version, Matthew 5:13); dust (the dust of Genesis which finds its way into the Ash Wednesday service in the Book of Common Prayer as well as the burial rite, Genesis 3:19, and the product of alchemical calcination, see Archer 5). With "this orb" Pulter evokes the alembic, the alchemical vessel in which matter is burned to dust, purified by fire, as well as the earth, the globe, and the poem itself ("this orb"), a metaphor to which I will return. These two narratives of purification, religious and alchemical, are intertwined, yoked with paradox, eroticism and allusions to sonnet form.

In the sole manuscript of Pulter's poetry, this poem's only full stop occurs halfway through the final line. Alice Eardley has written about the importance of this punctuation point, accentuated by the fact that this poem is in a different hand to the majority of the manuscript, and probably Pulter's own (while this hand has not been definitively attributed to Pulter, it also appears at the start of the volume to claim the poems for Hadassah, Pulter's biblical pseudonym).[xi] This full stop provides a sense of completion after the uplifting hope that God "Will raise me unto life" (see Blake). It also raises many questions about how to interpret the subsequent phrase "I know not how". In one reading, this acts as a statement of faith, a modest declaration of the limits of human understanding, that could be glossed as "I do not know how God will do it but He can". Yet, as Eardley shows, this hope is undercut by the poem's formal features: with fifteen lines,

she extends beyond sonnet length; with an odd number of lines in a couplet poem she creates the anticipation of a further line which is not fulfilled; after the full stop in line 15 she creates abrupt uncertainty with the half line "I know not how", a thought left hanging and not closed with punctuation. So the form of the poem questions its promised "hope".

In "The Hope," Pulter also seems to edge into explorations of epicureanism and atheism. The lines "Yet still that God that can annihilate | This all, and it of nothing recreate" pull in several directions. They evoke the terrifying, potentially destructive power of an Old Testament God. They also affirm God's power to create from nothing. Yet this assertion acts to evoke counter arguments, specifically the Lucretian philosophy widely discussed in the mid-century. In Lucy Hutchinson's translation, probably written around the same time as Pulter's poems, Lucretius asserts:

> God neuer aniething of nothing made;
> But soe are mortall men restreind with dread,
> As seing severall works in heaven, and earth,
> And ignorant of the cause that gives them birth,
> They thinke a power devine brings forth those things;
> But grant that nothing out of nothing springs,
> Then we shall soone perceiue how things are made
> And whence they flow, without deviner ayd.
>
> (Hutchinson 27; translation of Lucretius, *De rerum natura*, ll. 1. 155-62)

These are lines to which Lucy Hutchinson gave particular emphasis with the marginal gloss "That nothing springs of it selfe without principles" (Hutchinson 27). While Pulter's poem explicitly counters Lucretius in claiming God's ability to create from a vacuum ("of nothing recreate"), the atomist vocabulary and ideas of "The Hope" vividly – and somewhat surprisingly – evoke these topical and controversial debates. The poem's form, especially its unusual fifteen-line length, its evocation of a sonnet and then frustration of those expectations, and the uncertainty of its closing half line, leave this tension intact.

Pulter's closing confession, or assertion, "I know not how", provides "The Hope" a double edge between faith and doubt. In 'Of the Subtlety of Motion', Pulter's contemporary Margaret Cavendish portrays the poet's response to God's unknowability:

> Could we the several motions of life know,
> The subtle windings, and the ways they go:
> We should of unknown things dispute no more,
> How they be done, but the great God adore.
> But we with ignorance about do run,
> To know the ends, and how they first begun (Ross and Scott-Baumann 213)

Here the poem is taken from 1664. In the original version of 1653, it reads, "We should adore God more, and not dispute / How they are done, but that great God can do it", a more radical question altogether: can God even do it? Though Pulter is fundamentally a devotional poet, and Cavendish is very much not, Pulter's poem does to some extent untie its promise of religious hope: like so many Herbert poems, it makes you return to its start. Pulter pushes against sonnet

form as she pushes against conventional consolation. In “The Hope” we see a devotional poet of profound belief, but one who, like Herbert and Donne, was not afraid to write of doubt and fear and to express these through formal innovation as well as materialist vocabulary. With her fourteen- (and fifteen-) line poems about circles, winding staircases and orbs, Pulter’s poem joins Marvell’s “Coronet” and Herbert’s “A Wreath” in a tradition of devotional circle poems.

* * *

PULTER’S URNS

One image in Pulter’s “The Circle” not yet addressed is that of the urn: “By time and fate to dust are all calcined/ Lying obliviated in their urn/ Till they to their great ancestors return.” (ll. 10-12)

Cleanth Brooks’s book *The Well Wrought Urn* famously drew together the eponymous urn from Donne’s ‘The Canonization’ with those of Shakespeare, Gray and Keats. The connection of New Criticism to Pulter is a perverse and anachronistic one, of course, drawing on an often universalizing and conservative methodology to read material that is known only because of scholarly approaches antithetical to it: feminism, book history, manuscript study. But before abandoning it, what might be gained by a somewhat whimsical counterfactual: how would the New Critics have read Hester Pulter? Of his genealogy of urn poems, Brooks claims:

> The poem is an instance of the doctrine which it asserts … The poet has actually before our eyes built within the song the ‘pretty room’ with which he says the lovers can be

> content. The poem itself is the well-wrought urn which can hold the lovers' ashes and which will not suffer in comparison with the prince's 'half-acre tomb' …
> (Brooks 17)

For all these poems, he argues, the urn is the poem itself and it contains the ashes of a phoenix which will be reborn in the next urn-like poem. The urn unites a series of great poems, yet it is also a way of reading them as self-contained, separated from the intellectual and material culture around their production. This approach has been challenged in all sorts of ways to which need not be added to here. Building on many critiques of the implied politics of Brooks's approach, Caroline Levine has also recently criticised his formalism itself, arguing that Brooks's urn turns out to be an "unapt metaphor": "he focuses so much on containment that he ignores other formal intricacies and differences across the urns of his book" (Levine 26). But to make a slightly different point focused on the metaphor at the heart of Brooks's book: what is Pulter's urn?

In "The Circle [2]", Pulter uses the urn to show up the shared vanity of both alchemy and the sonnet: the reproductive, immortalizing, monumentalizing aspirations of both arts. Pulter's urn is a burial vessel, an alembic, a sonnet. So it is also a "parable of poetry", to use Brooks's phrase, but one with a critical edge (Brooks 214). There is an astonishing nihilism in Pulter's phrase "lying obliviated in their urn". She empties out the symbolic associations of the urn with memorialization and preservation, focusing on its literal usage for both burial and experiment. Pulter questions the urn poem, the poem as urn, the unifying container which transmits a certain kind of poetics into eternity.

Urns reappear in at least seven of Pulter's poems and indeed they often represent temporariness rather than permanence. In her emblem poem, "View But this Tulip", Pulter's speaker promises, "So into dust this flesh of mine must turn, /And lie a while forgotten in my urn" (ll. 33-4). She compares the body's time in the urn to the leftover wheat which is ploughed back into the field and will grow again (ll. 30-31); just as the body lies waiting to be reunited with the soul at "a glorious spring" (l. 28).[xii] In "The Perfection of Patience of Knowledge", the urn is again merely a stopping place for the body:

> But oh my soul, once more, return,
> And call me in my silent urn.
> But if asleep I then am found,
> Jog me, and say the trump doth sound.
> Then will I rise and fly away
>
> ("The Perfection of Patience of Knowledge", ll. 22-26, Pulter 2014)

Here the urn is a temporary container for the body while the soul ascends. In "The Welcome [2]" and "Universal Dissolution", similarly, it is death which transforms the human: death is a mere "nap" through which we are transformed into "everlasting story" ("The Welcome [2]", l. 10). Indeed, these two poems use almost exactly the same urn couplet:

> Where I to my first principles must turn
> And take a nap in black Oblivion's urn
>
> ("The Welcome [2]", ll. 7-8, Pulter 2019, ed. Knight and Wall)

So man to his first principles must turn,
And take a nap in black Oblivion's urn.

("Universal Dissolution, Made When I Was with Child, of my 15th Child, my Son, John, I Being, Everyone Thought, in a Consumption, 1648", ll. 15-16, Pulter 2019, ed. Knight and Wall)

The title of this fascinating poem makes explicit the individual—and specifically female and reproductive—experience behind the poem, yet also its prompt to consider universal transience and transformation: "Universal Dissolution, Made When I Was with Child, of my 15th Child, my Son, John, I Being, Everyone Thought, in a Consumption, 1648". In a series of reassuring yet devastating couplets, introduced by "So man [. . .] " (used eight times in the poem; this technique is also used in "The Circle [2]" to introduce the concluding analogy), Pulter expands her meditation on her own mortality, during a traumatic pregnancy, to consider the universality of mankind's transience:

So man, being tied to his Creator's laws,
Must taste of death and shrink unto his cause.

. . . . . .

So man, that to eternity aspires,
Conquered by death, into his cause retires.

("Universal Dissolution", ll. 31-2, 45-6)

The specific condition of pregnancy becomes universal as Pulter depicts the mortality of "man" as itself a return to his origins: in both these couplets she represents death as a return to "his cause". While devotional poems, including Pulter's own, might often represent death as a consolation, here Pulter does not represent death not as a God-given rest or escape. Instead she suggests a kind of cruel irony in the giver of life also taking it away: "So man (alas) no cure can find in death, / When He that gave it takes away his breath" ("Universal Dissolution", 67-8). While the accumulated vignettes of dissolution and decay provide some kind of reassurance, it is of the transience of everything rather than the spiritual renewal that one might expect, and which is promised in other poems. It is the myriad physical transformations of life on earth which lie at the centre of the poem, rather than its rationale for hope of an afterlife.

Alongside her unflinching depiction of mortality, Pulter elsewhere uses the urn to bolster specifically female kinds of voice and agency. In Emblem 20, "Who can but pity this poor turtledove", Pulter urges widows to cherish their husband's memory rather than remarrying too swiftly, or too many times. This is both a mark of piety and a means of freedom. She says of women who repeatedly re-marry, "A bitter thraldom she deserves to have, /Who being freed so oft would be a slave" (ll. 13-14). Pulter strikingly imagines the pious widow as her husband's urn. This is not, though, the course she recommends, any more than remarriage is:

> Yet anchorites I would not have you turn,
> Nor Alcyones, nor be your husband's urn,
> But chastely live and rather spend your days
> In setting forth your great creator's praise,
> And for diversion pass your idle times,

> As I do now, in writing harmless rhymes
>
> (Emblem 20, "Who can but pity this poor turtledove", ll. 40-45, Pulter 2014)

Pulter may here be alluding to Artemisia, wife of Mausolus, who not only built the Mausoleum to commemorate her husband but is also said to have drunk his ashes dissolved in wine (Pulter 2014, p. 213). But this message of constancy, pious mourning and self-restraint is tempered with a vision of widows' future life. Pulter introduces the image of the woman as her husband's urn only in order to reject it, along with becoming a nun or being transformed into a bird, like Alcyone. Instead of self-abnegation, she urges widows to a life of writing (the writing of religious poetry but also "of harmless rhymes" such as these emblem poems).

In "Universal Dissolution" and "Who can but pity this poor turtledove", then, Pulter deploys the image of the urn to serve a specifically female vision, one which focuses on pregnancy, childbirth, and a widowhood spent writing. As in Brooks's lineage of urn poets, the urn is an image which recurs in Pulter's poems about poetry and immortality. But it is not the urn which enables writing and immortality in these two poems; for Pulter, the urn is at best a temporary stopping place which is otherwise rejected in favour of female autonomy and authorship.

More broadly, Pulter's association of the urn with movement and transformation (rather than permanence and containment) is emphasised by its almost ubiquitous rhyme word in her work: "turn". In all her uses of the noun "urn" it functions as a rhyme word, and it is rhymed with "turn" in five of seven instances (in the other two, "The Circle [2]" and "The Perfection of Patience of Knowledge", it is rhymed with "return"). The pairing of "dissolution" and "revolution" in "Immense Fount of truth" is one of Pulter's signature rhymes; "urn" and

"turn/return" is another. A further pair that often appears in the same poems as urns is "story" and "glory", appearing in five of the seven poems that mention urns. Of course the rarity of this rhyme sound makes the repeated pairing of these words together less surprising, but like "urn" and "turn/return", Pulter often uses "story" and "glory" to explore issues around poetry and permanence. Both the rhyme pairs story/glory and urn/turn allow her to explore the sometimes contesting claims of preservation and transformation. The urn enables a turn, and also often a transformation (in the sense of "turn into").

Pulter's urns are, therefore, not (or not only) vessels of containment but ones of radical dissolution and transformation. The urn is a "parable of poetry", in Brooks's terms, for Pulter as much as it is for Donne or Keats; but Pulter's urns proleptically question the New Critics' focus on containment, unity and permanence. Instead of eternal preservation, Pulter's urns instead often represent dissolution; instead of a direct line of poetic descent, she offers a winding staircase; instead of male lineage, pregnancy and widowhood; a rejection of earthly fame as itself a kind of containment.

* * *

CONCLUSION

In one further poem exploring circular movement, "The Revolution", Pulter's speaker fantasises about dissolution: "I gladly will my form resign". Here "form" comes to mean both matter and shape, as she is dilated to fire, shedding both. Pulter's fantasies of dissolving and disintegrating seek the loss of form as well as of matter. She thus responds to secular, and masculine, narratives of permanence in both poetic form and matter by rejecting the urn for the circle, the orbit, the

revolution, the stair, forms of movement and renewal. But in rejecting "form", as she explicitly does in "The Revolution", she evokes more conventionally identified poetic forms: the sonnet, the concluding couplet, the rhyme pair that yokes two ideas. Tracing Pulter's more materialist senses of form (matter, container) therefore actually illuminates the kinds of form with which Brooks was more preoccupied (the sonnet). In a period when relatively few sonnets were written, our understanding of this form is enriched by seeing how a mid-century writer's fourteen- and fifteen-line couplet poems toyed with its proportions and rhetorical conventions, drawing out the sonnet's associations with the circle and using these to further spiritualize the form. Diana Henderson, while suggesting more varied ways of defining sonnets by women, also acknowledges the uncomfortable sense of wanting women to have written sonnets because they were, and are, a highly valued form. Pulter's poems are a dazzling demonstration of a woman poet in the seventeenth century sharing exactly this two-fold movement: drawn to the sonnet yet sharply critiquing its values, both aesthetic and gender-political.

Metaphors of form like Pulter's might help us understand how women theorized form as well as the specific poetic forms they used. We can read such poems as "The Circle [2]", "Immense fount of joy" and "The Hope" as couplet sonnets, following Diana Henderson's argument about the flexibility of the sonnet in the seventeenth century. We can also read them as criticism of the sonnet form, especially in its Elizabethan, Petrarchan and masculinist conventions. In the service of New Critics, reading formally from metaphors of form became a technique for reading the poem as purely self-referential, a way of excluding apparently external, material contexts. But for twenty-first century criticism, reading women poets for form might mean both a materialist redefinition of form—to include urns, stairs and circles alongside sonnets and couplets—and a way of recognizing women writers' dialogue with such icons of formalism as the sonnet.

* * *

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[i] For further discussion, see Kinney; Roberts; Scott-Baumann.

[ii] On the need for glossing, see Eardley "Hester Pulter's Indivisibles".

[iii] See Smith; Henderson.

[iv] See Vickers; Freccero.

[v] See Archer.

[vi] Lewis and Short.

[vii] See, for example, Moore “Labyrinth as Style”.

[viii] See also Smith, Distiller, Warley.

[ix] See Smith; Distiller; Moore, “Desiring Voices”; Vickers; Salzman.

[x] See Dolan; Nixon

[xi] Eardley “ ‘I haue not time to point yr booke”.

[xii] See Dolan in this collection on Pulter’s agricultural metaphors.